Social Work Through Collaborative Autoethnography.

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'We write to taste life twice……. in the moment and in retrospection.' (Nin, 1974 p.149)

Abstract

This paper discusses a research project involving 5 MA Social Work Students and 1 member of Social Work Academic Staff.

Using narrative and taking a collaborative autoethnographical approach, this project highlights some of the feelings that students articulated following a 70 day placement experience. Findings include anxiety, powerlessness and frustration, together with growing confidence, recognition of their skills and a deeper understanding of the role of 'self' in social work. Raising issues of preparedness for practice placement, this paper has implications for both social work practice and social work education.

Autoethnography (AE) is both a method of carrying out research and a methodology, specifically a qualitative methodology linked to ethnography and narrative inquiry. AE results in highly personalised narrative accounts of the researcher's engagement

with specific sociocultural contexts in the pursuit of knowing more about a phenomenon. Applying such a methodology to explore collaboratively issues of student lived experience of placement is a new and innovative use of this method.

Key Words

Social work; Autoethnography; Narrative; Social Work Placements; Collaboration.

Introduction

Autoethnography (AE) is an approach to research and writing, seen both as a methodology and a method (Chang, 2016). Autoethnographers seek to describe personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno) and then systematically analyze (graphy) them (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

While AE has thus far been little used in social work practice and education, it is an emerging methodological approach that offers new and different insights and opportunities to examine the impact of social workers' personal and professional identities on their practice and, ultimately, upon themselves. AE is developing as an area of increasing interest in the social sciences, and in a range of disciplines including social work (Witkin, 2014) nursing (Peterson, 2015) and occupational therapy (Denshire & Lee, 2013).

In utilising autoethnography (AE) as a method of choice, data is generated by the use of narrative(s) related to a specific practice, event or moment, which is then returned to and contextualised by reference to culture and its artefacts, then explored for

connections, both actual and theoretical to provide meaning and aid understanding of the situation(s) and (often complex) personal and social phenomena. It is important at this juncture to differentiate between AE and (critical) reflective practice, in particular when thinking about the critical reflections of and on practice produced by many social work students on their practice placements. Reflecting on one's practice is commonplace for professionals in health and social care services (Baldwin, 2016 White, Fook & Gardner, 2006) and narrative accounts are frequently used as a vehicle for this. For Yip (2007) reflective practice is to do with the action(s) of one**self**, where one engages in observation, dialogue, analysis and differing forms of evaluation. Whilst for many social work students critical (self) analysis of practice adopts a narrative approach, this is not necessarily autoethnographic as they do not necessarily focus on the broader social and/or cultural context(s). It is this contextualisation with broader social and cultural ideas, artefacts, norms and practices that differentiates AE from critical reflection of and on practice. The current research project is a qualitative collaborative autoethnographic study. For Chang, (2016) it is precisely this broad-based cultural analysis and its interpretive nature that distinguishes autoethnography from other forms of self-narrative. Collaborating with others to share autoethnographic accounts develops and expands this method beyond reflection alone and supports the understanding of social phenomena, *in vivo* so-to-speak. The interactive nature of (particularly collaborative) autoethnography strengthens ways to explore the relevance and impact of broader socio-cultural experiences with others, expanding these in terms of both breadth and depth. As Hamilton, Smith and Worthington (2008:24) note: '*in auto-ethnography, the researcher uses an ethnographic wide-angle lens with a focus on the social and cultural aspects of the personal'*

Although reflection and autoethnography both privilege use of the self, there are in many cases, a blurring of genres. Drawing on the work of others, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) 'situate' AE in a specific methodological space; however it is acknowledged that there are a number of different approaches to research that rest on a continuum, and that interpretation of terminology used to describe such tempo-spatial differences tends to vary. The connection between self narrative, autobiographical narrative, autoethnography and critical reflection as research methodologies (to name but a few) may all be seen as bridging the (many) gap(s) between literature and research. It is therefore the interpretation and usage of such that needs to be seen as salient, rather than intellectualized probing of terminology – following Wittgenstein (2009, section 109), we need to be careful not to 'bewitch' our intelligence because of the way we use language.

A challenge in terms of shaping knowledge and discourse in social work practice and education is that of who's voice is heard and privileged and how this is then used to inform practice and policy? Students in the UK are provided with a mechanism for feedback on their chosen programme of study (The National Student Survey (NSS) for Undergraduates and the Postgraduate Taught Education Survey (PTES) for postgraduates) as well as institutionally-generated processes. However, how such narratives inform practice and impact on the students themselves is less well articulated or understood (Howe, 2002), and student involvement in research projects as active investigators is limited. AE has the potential to develop personal insight and empathy and to explore, amongst other topics, power dynamics whilst at the same time offering an opportunity for students to engage in developing and shaping both social work education and practice. AE also has the potential for use

with service users and carers, although the focus of this paper is on its use with social work students.

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) develops and expands AE taking it one step further, conceptualizing it as a wider-ranging form of autoethnography that necessitates the involvement of other participants to co-construct a narrative. Collaborative autoethnography therefore involves multiple researchers developing multiple narratives that pivot around a common experience (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). In this project the common experience was a 70-day practice placement and reflections on the process of working towards becoming a qualified social work practitioner.

In England, undergraduate and postgraduate social work students typically spend at least 170 days in direct, assessed practice, spread across two field placements (1x70 days and 1x100 days), in private, voluntary, independent or statutory agencies. Students are assessed against the requirements of the Professional Capabilities Framework (British Association of Social Workers, (BASW) 2018) focusing on both practical and academic skills and abilities, and are required to critically reflect and report on their own practice experiences. Insight into the relevance and practice – value of critical reflection from students' perspectives is seen as key in reducing the theory – practice divide (Heron & Murray, 2004; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Witkin, 2011; Witkin & Harrison, 2001).

Using CAE as a method of inquiry, students draw on personal experiences to examine and critique the 'cultural' experience of undertaking a practice-learning placement, in this case one of 70 days.

Boylorn and Orbe (2016) note there are more than 300 published definitions of 'culture'. For this project the shared understanding is one provided by Hugman (2012), namely that it is a 'combination of a 'world view' and of social practices that express and sustain that view' (Hugman, 2012 p4).

Writing in the first person from 'insider' knowledge and making their thoughts accessible, students are encouraged to develop their understanding of social work as a practice-oriented experience through the medium of the placement, and how they begin to make sense of themselves as co- constructors of knowledge in and for practice.

Critical reflexivity and reflection are both necessary and ever-present in the writing of AE (Jensen-Hart & Williams 2010). Within social work education in England, critical reflection is one of the 9 domains of the Professional Capability Frameworks (PCF) (BASW, 2018) is seen as significant in the knowledge and skills statements (Skills for Care, 2015) and is an essential skill for practitioners and students to attain/maintain (Fook, 2016). Critical reflection provides a way of 'standing back' and seeing the issue from a different perspective; it is a way of uncovering assumptions in order to facilitate change and developing knowledge and understanding (Baldwin, 2016). The reciprocity that exists in CAE facilitates discussion that enables a deeper level of critical reflection to be accessed. This in turn influences the likelihood of students understanding what they have experienced on placement and their beginning to shape and link their unique experiences with those of others. By situating those

alongside the culture of placement (for example systems, and policies, engaging with staff and service users and carers), as well as what the literature tells us of practice placements, leads to greater understanding. For students trying to make sense of the experience in retrospect, making such links collaboratively promotes clarity, and generates new knowledge for them to draw on as students and as future practitioners. Through CAE one's own experiences reflect and extend the body of knowledge that surrounds student placements per se and subsequent processes of critical reflection.

As a social work academic with a keen interest in AE, I, was eager to explore the merits of CAE and to support students to get involved to develop and shape a piece of research that would potentially help with their professional and personal advancement. As a former social work practitioner, now a social work educator, I am aware of the ever-increasing pressures on both social work practitioners and students. Rising case loads, limited time for reflection, and cuts to services all impact on the day-to-day activities of social work practitioners (de Ruyter, Kirkpatrick, Hoque, Lonsdale, & Malan, 2008; Ferguson, 2017). I believe AE is an accessible form of powerful research and one that has possibilities to engage with a wide audience.

Teaching a post-graduate research methods module allows me an opportunity to introduce students to a variety of research methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. Knowing students have a basic underpinning of the principles of research and various methodologies and research methods, I obtained ethical approval from the University ethics committee for permission to approach students to become involved in an extra curricular project to explore through CAE issues of critical reflection in relation to a post graduate first practice learning opportunity.

Recognising as Thrift (p.119 in Pryke, Rose, & Whatmore, 2003) suggests, informed consent can be an ethical position, not merely a case of ticking boxes, it is important to note that the project, as an abstract, was discussed in depth before volunteers were sought.

Materials and Method

The word 'autoethnography' is often used as an umbrella term to describe a variety of approaches - for example critical autobiography, narrative autobiography, ethnography of the self. It is a narrative method of inquiry, located firmly at the qualitative end of the research spectrum. There are different strands to the methodological approaches to autoethnography, each informed by differing research backgrounds and traditions and as such, this approach has been developed in a variety of ways (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). As with any methodological approach, variations exist depending on aims and objectives of any particular study; however autoethnographical approaches all are rooted in the strong sense of self-inquiry which is underpinned by interpretivism. Autoethnographers use their personal experiences as data, and try to make this meaningful via their link with 'culture', which includes an appreciation of the wider literature surrounding the topic(s) of inquiry. By producing accessible narrative texts, autoethnographers aim to be able to engage with and reach wider and more diverse audiences that traditional research may often disregard (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016). The method offers nuanced and specific knowledge about a researcher's own perspective-thus the researcher is both the collector and generator of data, or both researcher and research participant.

AE in social work education may offer opportunities to extend the professional learning opportunities afforded by everyday practice and discourse. Typically written as a narrative account, in AE the focus is on the author as the subject, going beyond autobiography through its link with culture and the 'revisiting' of experiences. AE involves exposing and exploring one's own experiences and engaging with these in analysis and interpretation. Autoethnographic writing links well with the values and skills associated with social work such as empathy self awareness and a strong sense of social justice. The experiences we have as social workers and as social work students, are recounted within the context of our own lives, and framed within the broader socio-cultural perspective in order to 'ground' them. All writing is interpretive, and an autoethnographic account is but one amongst many; however it is an effective means to develop understanding of a phenomenon in an accessible and more 'reader friendly' format.

Within this particular project, AE had the potential for social work students to learn from their own experiences and the experience and reflections of other social work students engaged in similar 'cultural' practices, providing a viable point of reference for each. It was not an easy option, nor was it a short cut to engaging in and producing research. Social work students and practitioners considering AE as a way of developing their understanding of practice and theory need to be aware of the difficulties associated with this method. There can be no neutrality, no hiding behind a distant research persona, AE may be complicated, disorganized and fragmented with all the messiness of lived experiences, and in this example, social work practice placements are highlighted and 'laid bare' in an account that is in no way objective and neutral.

Such an approach produces accounts that are readable and accessible, including to those without an academic (privileged) background, indicating ways in which CAE might in future be used with those who may be on the receiving end of services. AE may also help to bridge the gap between social work practice and research, given as suggested, by Jeffrey (2013) that that most university students and social workers alike, tend not to read research. (Hoeft, 2012; Jeffrey 2013) Research about the use and impact of critical reflection remains limited, and research that draws on CAE to support this even less so; therefore, this was for me one of the main drivers for the development of this project.

As a lecturer and programme lead for MA Social work I was conscious of the power imbalance and from the outset of the project acknowledged this, and searched and for ways to mitigate this to some extent. I am module lead for a post-graduate research methods module, attended by a cohort of 20 social work students where AE was discussed, therefore I knew students had received a basic introduction to the area. Submitted work from this cohort had been marked and returned with feedback before I asked for volunteers to become involved with the project, additionally I am not involved in assessing students from this point. The time line of the project was as follows:

- Ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee.
- Information was made available from a third party to 20 post-graduate social work students about the project. This included an open invitation to a ‘fact finding meeting’.

- 5 students agreed to participate.
- Written guidelines were given to students. Signed consent was obtained.
- Students produced written auto ethnographies.
- Accounts were shared and discussed electronically between students.
- A discussion group was held to draw out themes and make links
- Students self selected a theme or area to write about.
- Consent was given by students to use extracts from their written accounts.

I wanted to capture student experiences and reflections of their feelings following their first practice placement, asking them to consider whether and how feelings about placement, and becoming a social work practitioner, had altered from the start of the course some 15 months earlier. The 'baseline' was taken to be their expectations at the start of the programme. I wanted students to share their autoethnographies and collaborate in producing a shared account of the phenomenon.

By sharing these accounts students recognised and highlighted some key areas, of interest for themselves, for educators and for social work practitioners. One student commented that the CAE study 'differed from practice reflection in that it stretched us as we were in a different mindset.'

On a practical basis, drawing on a small sample (5) had several advantages, not least practical. In-depth discussions between the participants occurred in a relaxed and supportive environment. There was an opportunity for each member to read the accounts of the others in the group, and share documents electronically that may not have been possible with a larger group.

Within CAE, processes for data collection are the same as those often utilized in ethnography (Madden, 2017) for example use of documents and field notes, which are in AE often created from memories (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Students as autoethnographers in this project collected data by means of participation, self-observation, and for some, reviewing their own documents. Data analysis was ongoing through virtual and face to face discussions, it was dissected and 'meanings made' (Chang, 2016) that were then interpreted in an attempt to make sense of the meanings students had of placement and their feelings on this. As noted above, an in-depth discussion was held where the overriding perception of practice placements was explored and the social practices that express and sustain such perceptions highlighted. From this in depth discussion, and sharing of written accounts electronically, themes were identified. Students as autoethnographers aimed to gain an understanding of self and others specifically in relation to their placement experiences and the impact this had on their wanting to become social work practitioners.

Autoethography can be a multi faceted medium and this project had several aims. This paper focuses upon one of the aims of the project namely obtaining the thoughts and feelings expressed by students, and considering to what extent a collaborative autoenthography (surely an oxymoron?) might be used to inform and develop the knowledge base regarding social work student placements. In essence AE is used here as a vehicle for social work students to critically reflect on their feelings post placement 1 (70 days) and look forward to placement 2 (100 days) linking their feelings and experiences into the wider culture that is social work practice placements.

Results and Discussion

Students all produced a written reflective account, initially it was suggested that these primarily look at their reasons for wanting to become social workers and whether these reasons had changed following their first placement of 70 days. The accounts produced varied in emphasis on different aspects of this remit and were shared electronically between the five students. Reading and re-reading their own paper and those of others was followed by a collaborative discussion that aimed to support an in-depth analysis and led to the identification of 4 salient themes. These themes were:

1) Experiences on Placement. Relating Theory to Practice.
2) Doing Something Meaningful.
3) Managing Expectations of Placement and Social Work Practice.
4) Conscious of Self/Perceptions of Age of Student and making sacrifices.

Students were reminded that as autoethnographers they were expected to treat their data in a critical and analytical manner (Chang, 2016). As noted above analysis was ongoing and threaded throughout the discussions as opposed to being a distinct stage. The purpose of analysis is to deepen cultural understanding of the relationship between the self and wider society. In order to identify themes, students made links with practice culture and the wider literature, and were analytical in identifying and recognizing the subtleties and nuances of their own accounts and those of others.

1) Experiences on Placement. Relating Theory to Practice.

Students discussed how they remembered feeling before going on placement. As with all new experiences, steps into the unknown bring about a mixture of uncertainty and risk. For the students in this project their reflections on preparing for placement brought about a mixture of emotions summed up as both 'surviving and thriving' during this time.

> Going on placement I did not know what to expect, but it was a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Excitement, because I was finally going to get the opportunity to engage with social work practice on a practical level beyond case studies and role plays. Apprehension about what I would be faced with, and whether I would undertake my placement successfully.

Students recognized, as indicated in the literature (Fook, 2016; Parker, 2017) the benefits brought about by drawing on a well-grounded body of knowledge when in practice, and the importance of seeing knowledge as a process and not merely a product. Differing experiences were drawn on to highlight their experiences of placement (Jones & Lomax, 2014) as well as how they drew on the expertise of practice educators (Moriarty et al 2009). Challenges (both to oneself and to others) were present for all the group to some extent: here, one participant recounts a specific issue encountered during placement.

> Early on in my placement I was faced with a dilemma. I was tasked with supporting a client who wanted help with completing an online application. I respected the client's wishes and proceeded to work with them in undertaking the task. However, prior to entering the client's details I wanted to check the

> website was a safe and reputable platform. I have no much experience on detecting fraudulent websites, but I had some basic awareness – especially after having had followed a TV programme on internet safety a few days earlier. I noticed that some of the basic indicators of webpage safety appeared to be missing, including the absence of a 'padlock' sign and contact details. I explained to the client my concerns about the safety of the webpage and importance of protecting her personal (and sensitive) details. The client said they understood my concerns, but nevertheless wanted to press ahead and get the form completed.

The autoethnography from which this extract is taken was discussed between the group. Collaboratively it was agreed that the use of a theoretical framework helped to guide the analysis and understanding of problematic situations. The relevance of using social work methods, models and theories was discussed by the group. Through discussion common ground was reached with a key point being that having a theoretical framework enables students to work with and support clients effectively – and may assist to maintain people's quality of life and support risk management.

Further reflections on the placement experience highlighting the link between theory and practice include:

> Overall, placement offered me an important avenue to apply various social work theories in practice, this was possible as a result of the support I had throughout my entire stay, from the agency and other professionals who I met. The confidence to apply social work theories taught academically was very

> beneficial to me and to people on my caseload and this was made possible due to a variety of reasons, not least of which was support from colleagues.

One group member noted how the theoretical knowledge gained at University was also helpful in managing 'pre placement nerves:'

> I reassured myself with the knowledge that while my social work practical experience may seem limited, I nevertheless had some advantage going on to the placement - my new-found theoretical knowledge on how to approach social work practice. This included for instance social work theories, values, methods, models as well as legislation and policies. I reminded myself that I was actually not going onto the placement empty-handed, that I had actually some theoretical framework on which to underpin my practice and ensure its safety, reliability and effectiveness.

2) Doing Something Meaningful

The second theme to emerge also involved the relationship between theory and practice although this tended to be implicit in the discussion. This theme focussed in the main on the students reflections on their doing 'something meaningful' (and what this means) whilst on placement, and related in part to support from colleagues and other students.

Here one member of the group recounts:

> My whole experience of first placement has been memorable and worthwhile and this was made possible because of the support given by the placement agency and their recognition of me not only as a student but as a member of their team, enabled me to flourish and develop. The dynamic and diverse background of my caseload provided challenging learning opportunities which often meant a not so smooth engagement with other professionals as desired. Placement offered me the ideal avenue for me to apply theory to practice in my engagement with people. Though each caseload was unique, many people experienced similar issues, for example 'rough' sleeping and many had a history of non-engagement with services.

The concept of 'doing something meaningful' may be seen as relating to the work of Urdang (2010) who describes how students tend to be idealistic, and want to help people without fully understanding what this entails as well as their own involvement in the process.

For another group member:
'On my first placement I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work alongside professionals of all ages and felt viewed as a valuable member of the team, doing something useful not merely a student'.

It became apparent as students collaborated and shared their accounts there were many similarities-the theme of 'doing something meaningful' was recognised and highlighted by group members:

> I would like to think that whilst on placement I helped to make a difference to someone who was struggling or in crisis. This may not have been just by doing something major, but also by just being there to listen, offering some advice, maybe make a suggestion which would benefit them and to show empathy.

All agreed with the comment that:
'On reflection some of the work that I did wasn't deemed to be that important but it can sometimes be the little things that can stay with someone, for whatever reason'.

3) Managing Expectations of Placement and Social Work Practice.

The collaborative discussion of the individual autoethnographies highlighted a shared experience regarding anticipation of placement.

> Once the initial teaching period was over, we were all understandably both nervous and excited to go out on placement. The anticipation of finding out where your initial placement would be, was palpable in class as everyone wanted a good placement which they will not only enjoy but will teach them how to be a good social worker.

This, the third theme to emerge from the discussions focussed on the practicalities of students ensuring they were ready, both practically and emotionally, for placement and all it entailed as well as making sure they had a realistic appreciation on what was to come.

Some group members noted this in their autoethnographies:

> There is such an expectation that is put on you from the lecturers and several people felt the build up from the first couple of months with the inevitability of having to go (and pass) your placement. Having that awareness from the start almost makes it even more nerve racking which in a way normalises it- the emotion.

Expectations regarding the reality of placement and indeed social work practice per se, featured heavily in this theme, as did the importance of reflection and the benefits of looking at situations from the distance of time and location. One participant noted that:

> It was only on reflection that some of the group members were able to recognise the good work that they were able to do, even if it wasn't necessarily in the same way or at the pace that they first thought it would take place. This was something that really resonated with me as I think I probably felt that was as well.

Group members also noted the importance of managing expectations.

> Managing student's expectations around placement is something which needs to be taken more seriously by lecturers. They tend to use their own practice experience to highlight a piece of research or legislation which is great,

> normally followed by a phrase like ‘you’ll see this on your placement’. This makes you feel geared up for entering into the social work profession with this firefighter attitude when in reality it isn’t always like that.

From the accounts it also seemed that people were aware of the power and status that the role of student social worker entailed, understanding that it is an important role and one to do well.

> I think when we go out on placement there is almost an energy of ‘you can do and achieve anything you like’ and it sounds like a couple of the students really had that opportunity which is great. It also seems like boredom and repetition played a big role for some of the students as well, so it’s a pretty mixed bag really. Having views and opinions discussed and challenged was something that was a valuable experience for some of us in this CAE group. That’s really positive as it has allowed us to have a broader understanding about what social work is like as a whole and how important it is to constantly be challenging yourself. Otherwise it can lead to poor practice when stereotyping can affect you, whether you’re aware of it or not’

Through CAE what became apparent was the students belief that even a negative placement experience has something to learn from and may offer a wealth of knowledge about good or bad practice in the profession.

4) Conscious of self/ Perceptions of age of social work student. Making Sacrifices.

The fourth theme to emerge was that of 'perceptions of self'. Participants were acutely aware of the impact they had on the people with whom the worked, as well as how they were viewed by those on the social work programme and on placement. We live in an ageist society and ageism, or discrimination based on age is incredibly complex (Gendron, Welleford, Inker, & White, 2016)–it can be covert and the sense of this was explored by one participant in her account:

> When I went for an interview for a placement, I always had in the back of my mind 'What age are they expecting this student (Me) to be?' Stereotypically, I viewed students to be no older than late twenties, maybe? Would the placement be disappointed by my mature years and prefer someone younger? Would they give me a placement out of pity? or on my ability and suitability for the role. All these thoughts would be whizzing around in my head. However, my concerns were to be unfounded and, on both occasions, I was offered a placement at the first meeting.

The group openly discussed their desire to make a positive change in society and their enthusiasm for the social work profession, looking at perceived advantages and maintaining a positive outlook.

One group member noted:

'On reflection being a mature student had its advantages. For me, my own personal life experiences equipped me with an understanding into the fragility of life and how anyone of us may be affected my adversity or crisis'.

This topic was explored in some depth. For one student:

‘I would consider maturity may bring wisdom but it may also bring familiarity and a resistance to change. In contrast, a younger student may possess a more modern way of thinking and challenge existing strategies and structure’.

The collaborative view on this was summed up succinctly by one student as:

‘It helped me to realise that it was not the age of the student that potentially affects practice but the application of that student’s skills, knowledge and personal qualities when assessing situations that really count towards effective outcomes’.

After collaborating and reflecting as a group, what became apparent from the autoethnographic accounts which were shared, was the essence of sacrifice building up to the decision to take on the social work course. When discussing the accounts, each member recognised that the decision to train as a social worker involved financial sacrifices for the two years the programme took to complete.

For one student:

> I felt that this (change of career) had somehow made my decision to commit to the course selfish, as I wanted more gratification and satisfaction for myself from an employment perspective, as working in the charity sector had not provided me with this in my working career so far.

Through the discussions it was agreed that by the end of the first year (including first placement) the sacrifice had been worth it. One group member had a ‘less than

positive' experience on placement, however this still made the individual's passion for social justice thrive and in turn not regret the decision to undergo the course. This echoes findings in the literature which points to the evidence that social work students do on occasions rate their placements negatively, finding them emotionally demanding and stressful, (Grant, Kinman & Alexander, 2014).

Autoethnographers are encouraged to consider how their engagement with the 'field' has contributed to their self-understanding (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013) collaborative autoethnography develops skills of communication and writing- as well as ways of both knowing and understanding-in this project it relates to the 'self' and to the profession students are hoping to join. However autoethnography is but one means amongst many to obtain perspectives relating to a given topic. It is not a method without criticism. One member of the research group bravely acknowledged this when she said that she felt some students had held back slightly in their autoethnographic accounts. With still one placement to go, anything that may jeopardise that, is likely to have significant personal and significant implications. The fear of placement breaking down for whatever reason and having to repeat some or all of it is not to be underestimated by educators and has implications for honesty and openness across the professional landscape. One group member noted:

> Sacrifices made to come on the course had caused us to fear addressing issues within our placement and with our practice educators, in case it (placement) was stopped and we were asked to start again elsewhere which would have further caused financial issues in our personal lives.

More exploration is needed regarding this area. We know students are relatively powerless on placement; the pressure is on students to perform as professionals from day one, for example final placements have been anecdotally described as ‘a 100 day interview.’ Whether this means students ignore or collude with poor practice, or a less than optimum experience is unknown. There is a need for further discussion of open and honest strategies to involve students and practitioners. There is also clearly a need for a more inclusive approach to social work practice and research. The hidden curriculum (Watts, 2015) and course culture that exist in Higher Education need to be acknowledged. Dialogue needs to take place and methods such as CAE working with students can surely only help to further develop this. Making research accessible engaging and something that students actively pursue brings such culture into the open and through dissemination offers greater awareness of some of the key issues. Lessons learned from using CAE include the benefits of dialogue and narrative. The complexity of obtaining views regarding the almost ‘hidden world’ of practice placements combined with a stark power imbalance is not to be underestimated. Student perceptions of (pre) placement feelings are key to developing a robust supportive and appropriately challenging experience and CAE is one way of facilitating that.

In conclusion, as noted in the literature Social Work students require support to develop their reflective skills to effectively manage the emotional demands of practice (Grant, 2014). Equally, skills of collaboration and communication are essential to successful social work practice. CAE is one such way to support this. Group members articulated the importance of this project in supporting the production of honest accounts from current students about placement experiences, recognizing the pressures noted earlier. These experiences and accounts are significant on a number of

levels for a range of people: future students who are required to undertake a practice placement may benefit from the experiences of other students in an accessible way; practice educators, both in University and in the placement agency may benefit from recognizing the anxieties students experience and the sacrifices made, and may look to strategies to support these; and the participants themselves, as the 5 group members all have another placement to undertake. When they are themselves qualified practitioners, they will be expected to mentor and provide placements for future students. The type of social worker they become will hopefully influence the students they mentor in a positive way.

The final word goes to the group members:

> AE accounts should be used more frequently to develop things like skills days, placements and ASYE roles too. Often academic writers may not have been practising social workers for a number of years and although attend all the relevant courses and teaching to become lecturers etc, they can often be quite far removed from what a student is genuinely experiencing at present but AE and CAE can help with the understanding. The future of social work changes yearly due to cuts and issues with budgets which means that placements and student experiences also change year on year and it is important to gain honest and realistic accounts of what is really happening on the ground, and for understanding why so many students do the course and then do not end up practising social work, or at least not practising in a statutory environment which is crying out for social work staff.

Declaration of Interest: None stated.

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